

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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ArtReview



The road not taken

Finding beauty in wasted landscapes, Robert Adams records shameful scenes in US history. By **Stuart Franklin**

Robert Adams brings a studied passivity to landscape photography, a genre that has borne on its shoulders so many of America's hopes, fears, joys and sorrows. In his latest book, *Turning Back*, and the exhibition of the same name, Adams reconciles himself to the impact of forest clearcutting in Oregon, where he now lives. The work is linked to the bicentennial of the Lewis and Clark expedition, an 8,000-mile return trip from St Louis, Missouri to the Pacific coast, during which the explorers 'discovered' the Columbia river and a vast forest of ancient evergreens.

The myth of discovery shares a parallel history with the idea of wilderness. Both emerged in the US during the late 19th and early 20th

centuries. Founded on an abject denial of history, the principle became ingrained in American culture – the West was unoccupied before Lewis and Clark pitched their tents. The painter Thomas Moran, who participated in Ferdinand Hayden's Yellowstone expedition, and the photographers William H Jackson and Ansel Adams were instrumental in connecting the notion of the 'uninhabited wilderness' to the Jeffersonian, nationalist pursuit of erasing and reinventing history.

As the environmental historian William Cronon wrote in *Uncommon Ground* (1995), 'The myth of the wilderness as "virgin" uninhabited land had always been especially cruel when seen from the perspective of the Indians who had once called that land home. Now they were forced to move elsewhere, with

the result that tourists could safely enjoy the illusion that they were seeing their nation in its pristine, original state, in the new morning of God's own creation.'

When Lewis and Clark arrived in 1805, the forest landscape of the Columbia river was settled by the Chinook, who lived in cedar huts and skilfully navigated the river by canoe. The landscape, now clearcut, is what Robert Adams set out to photograph.

Adams was born in 1937 in New Jersey, but studied and taught English literature in California before being drawn into the 'simple pleasure' of black-and-white photography. Following a symposium he attended on Western landscapes, Adams photographed the changing terrain of Colorado Springs. 'I came back puzzled by what I'd done,'

Above: Robert Adams, *A Stump Next to Oregon Highway 47, Columbia County*, gelatin silver print, from the series 'Turning Back: A Photographic Journal of Re-Exploration', 2005



'I try to say a yes and a no in the same picture,' says Adams. He seeks to convince by seeming unimpassioned. 'But,' he emphasises, 'you're not'



Top: Robert Adams, *On Humbug Mountain, Clatsop County, Oregon*, 1999-2003, gelatin silver print **Above:** *Clatsop County, Oregon*, gelatin silver print. Both from the series 'Turning Back', 2005

he remembered, because although the photographs, published in *The New West* (1974), were of cheaply built tract houses arranged across the high plains east of the Rocky Mountains, 'the pictures had something beautiful about them.' Adams recalled an aphorism of Jean-Luc Godard's cameraman, Raoul Coutard: 'Natural light is always perfect.' The high-altitude light Adams found in Colorado was sometimes too perfect: 'There are some things that shouldn't be misunderstood as wholly beautiful.' The photographer thus found himself drawn into a dialectic that he has worked for 30

years to resolve, between the violated landscape of the American West and the grace and redemptive spirit that sensitive photography can engender in any people at any time and in any place.

'I try to get a yes and a no within the same picture,' says Adams, echoing Lewis Hine's comment about trying to get what is right about the world, and what is wrong about it, into the same frame. Adams's approach is reminiscent of Mahatma Gandhi's celebrated approach to the human condition: 'I can combine the greatest love with the greatest opposition to wrong.' Adams's passive rather than active resistance to things that cause him pain, and his struggle to fuse his divided emotions into singular photographic statements, gives his work considerable and unexpected distinction.

Influenced by Timothy O'Sullivan, Dorothea Lange and the later work of Eugene Atget, Adams found in their work 'a clarity, a luminous wholeness', and in Atget particularly, 'profound meditations on the human condition: sad, thrilling, stable and accepting'. Within the tradition of American landscape photography, this work differs from the more immediately persuasive and popular images of Ansel Adams and Edward Weston or the impassioned gaze of the environmentalist on the landscape as seen in the Sierra Club book *Clearcut* (1989).

Adams seeks 'to convince people more' by seeming unimpassioned. 'But,' he emphasises, 'you're not.' He feels that *Turning Back* is anomalous, because he found it difficult to suppress his rage. The redemptive part of what he was trying to say comes at the end of the book in the story of an orchard that he and his wife discovered, a lament with a celebratory quality.

Thirty years ago, after publishing *The New West*, Adams found himself part of a cultural turn in American landscape photography that was to influence a whole generation of landscape and documentary photographers: the New Topographics movement. Although in no sense a true break from the past, their 1975 exhibition appeared to turn its back on the romantic or idealised landscape tradition exemplified by Eliot Porter and Ansel Adams, and instead portray the landscape as a process exhibiting change and human impact.

The notion of the wholly objective 'disembodied eye' often associated with the movement was, for Adams, never more than an aesthetic strategy: 'I did not feel objective. I felt a lot of pain about what I was seeing right from the start.'

His approach to the landscape is reminiscent of the Robert Frost poem *The Road Not Taken*, which closes with the lines: 'Two roads diverged in a wood, and I, / I took the one less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference.' It has been Adams's project in photography to find his own way, avoiding clearly marked paths, that makes his work so compelling and so important. It is telling that the landscape Adams discovers in *Turning Back* is not Emerson's restorative wilderness, but rather the garden, the 'paradise' that the Chinook may well once have tended.

'Robert Adams: Turning Back', to 25 Feb, Matthew Marks Gallery, New York (+1 212 243 0200, matthewmarks.com). Turning Back: A Photographic Journal of Re-Exploration, published by Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco (+1 415 981 2661, fraenkelgallery.com). 'Robert Adams: Landscapes of Harmony and Dissonance', 7 Feb-28 May, J Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles (+1 310 440 7300, getty.edu)